

Thersites and Odysseus

W.N. Herbert & Robin Osborne

When Thersites is introduced in *Iliad* 2, we are immediately made aware that he is a man like no other. He is the only character in the *Iliad* about whom we are told neither his place of origin nor his father's name. For him alone is reserved the epithet *ametroepes* – 'whose speech knew no measure', and in an unparalleled physical description he is pronounced to have been 'the ugliest man to come beneath Troy':

He was bandy-legged and lame in one foot, his two shoulders humped and drawn together over his chest. Above this his skull was misshapen with tufts of wool scattered upon it.

So when Thersites opens his mouth and gives a speech against Agamemnon we are prepared to hear 'many words in no order, vain, and without regard for decency... whatever he thought might raise a laugh'.

The response that Thersites' speech itself gets from Odysseus is of a part with the introduction. Odysseus tells him that he is the worst man who came before Troy and has no right to be heard, and he brings the sceptre down across Thersites' back producing a bloody wound, tears, and

Sorry though the men were they laughed over him happily.

Critics have often been happy to think that Thersites' place in the epic was precisely to give, in Mahaffy's words, 'a satire upon the first critics that rose up among the people, and questioned the divine right of Kings to do wrong'. But to read him in this way is to notice only the way he is framed and not what he says.

At the beginning of Book 2 Agamemnon has tried an experiment with the Greek army, calling their bluff with a proposal to depart from Troy forthwith. The army have jumped at this suggestion and Odysseus had to use both persuasion and force to check the stampede for the ships. Any soldier might find such deceit from a general whom he has no choice but to obey hard to stomach. Thersites' short complaint, far from being in no order and calculated only for laughs, as the introduction claims, echoes Achilles' speech in Book 1. It tells only the truth with its references to Agamemnon's tents full of precious metal and choice captive women whom he owes to the military activities of his soldiers. Thersites' question as to what Agamemnon wants to keep them in Troy for, unless yet more personal gain, is a reasonable one to ask of a leader who has himself just suggested that the claims of families left at home in Greece count for more than the shame of giving up the fight for Troy.

There is good reason then to reckon Thersites 'the incarnation of ugly truth' as one modern critic has dubbed him. Yet that truth is quite ignored when Odysseus responds by telling him that it is not for a man like him to argue with kings and then bludgeons him to the ground. Thersites may be personally despicable, and the sight of him suffering irresistibly funny, but there is reason for the soldiers to feel sorrow, too, as they laugh.

The class politics of the episode, then, is not nearly as one-sided as critics like Mahaffy have assumed, but in the *Iliad* the concentration on the personal, both in the portrait of Thersites and in his attack on Agamemnon means that the reader has to pay close attention to see the full force of the encounter in class terms. W. N. Herbert's poem, written in response to encountering these lines, has Thersites reply, and in his reply moves the argument from the level of particular complaints about Agamemnon to the expectation that the noble leaders have of their men.

*Take your paiks is every sodger's byword
jist as the arrows in their showers dinnae judge
sae our Lords cannae well distinguish
an order questioned from an order disobeyed.*

*I'm humphibackit because I cannae sleep
atween my brithers in the sand aside the ships
in the close, midgie-pitchit darkness
breathing piss and leather and our blood.*

*Lords dinnae curl in shattered ranks at nicht
but lie ahent their hide tents, walls
blanketed with stolen women, breast to flank,
and stare at treasures for their stars.*

*I hear the wounded measure hours wi groans
ignored by aa the thousands snoring in their faces,
the sentries mutter by their paced-out fires ^
and every dream's the opposite of fear and blades.*

*Why should your dunts and curses hurt me mair,
Odysseus, although I ken you are a Lord
and a liar? Because you understand
the motion o each man's mind is separate,*

*and yet you order us tae be what you are not:
two souls at once, one passive as
these women you've enslaved to bicker over,
the ither vicious as the hunting dogs you kick.*

*You say that I'm puss-ugly when you dinnae like
my thocht, and yet my flesh is fit enough
tae fling upon a Trojan spear. How ugly
is the lie that sends a man to war?*

*Let the sodgers laugh the way they must,
survivors of the moments you dictate;
let them borrow your rage but inherit fear:
tomorrow is the opposite of home.*

Here are Bill Herbert's own thoughts about his poem:

One of the things which may stand out about Thersites' reply is that I wrote it in Scots. I thought it might be interesting to set this register against the type of English which Homer is usually translated into, a 'proper' diction which, obviously, we therefore hear his heroes use. I was thinking of the value judgements that can be brought against non-standard Englishes like Scots, which is still occasionally perceived as a common or corrupt form of English; and I thought Odysseus' contempt for Thersites' speech might find an echo in the affected incomprehension with which some people still greet Scots. I was also mindful of the fact that another epic, the *Aeneid*, was first translated in these islands into the sixteenth century 'Scottis' of Gavin Douglas.

I saw in Thersites a model for those who are not listened to apparently because of who or what they are, but actually because of the difficult things they say. That is, those who are even lied to about why they are being excluded, or those who cause the excluders to lie to themselves about their own motives. Parallels seemed possible with a variety of the ignored, be they disenfranchised voters, disenfranchised workers, anti-war protestors, asylum seekers, or merely those articulating a complex message

in an era of over-eager simplification.

I was drawn towards Thersites not just because, in Charles Mingus' phrase, he is 'beneath the underdog', but also because he articulates something which appears to disrupt the epic's world-view. It's one thing for Achilles to criticise Agammemnon's motives, because we see that he is equally capable of greed and petulance - it's within the club, so to speak. It's quite another for Thersites to speak up from the ranks. Not only does he disrupt the social order, he demonstrates, in a world overlooked only by the gods (and of course by us, dear reader), that someone else is looking on. He is a witness who can judge even as he is beaten down and no doubt swept to destruction, and as such his voice prophesies those we hear in the poetry of Wilfred Owen or Osip Mandelstam. He is one of the many ways Homer persuades us the *Iliad* is a poem of perpetual relevance.

W.N. Herbert lives in a lighthouse. He writes poetry in both Scots and English and his four collections of poetry are published by Bloodaxe Books. The Big Bumper Book of Troy was published in 2002.

*Robin Osborne teaches Greek and Roman history at the University of Cambridge, and is an editor of **Omnibus**.*